Kabuki's Forgotten War, 1931–1945 (review)

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contemporary reception was alive to issues that help illuminate a reading of the film but that have been obscured for us with the passing of time.

The author provides a close reading of the film in the last section of the book, stressing what he calls the divided style of the work, that is, its adherence to conventional cinematic codes and its experimentation with and breaking of those codes. Through an analysis of editing techniques, of the way the temporal experience of the story unfolds, and of the fluid interactions between subject and object in the narration, Gerow explains how the film's contemporary audience had to deal with a "mad combination of experiment and melodrama" and urges that our own "spectatorship in that sense must match theirs" (p. 83).

Gerow ends with a broad appeal to see in *Kurutta ichipeiji,* with all its imperfections, the complexity of cinema and "how important it is for us to understand the ways in which people have tried to deal with this text, as well as our own role, through reading this film, in continuing the debates on cinema and modernity" (p. 99). This is a concise statement of the methodological assumptions that have guided this book, and the author has been true to those assumptions. Beyond the history and critical analysis he has provided, there are several appendices that include helpful material, such as translations of reviews and a sample of shooting notes of missing scenes. Gerow's book is a model of scrupulous scholarship and commentary that may be usefully assigned in courses not simply for its content but as an example to students of how to write seriously and sensitively across temporal and cultural boundaries.

Kabuki's Forgotten War, 1931–1945. By James R. Brandon. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2009. xiii, 465 pages. $52.00.

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One of the most trenchant commentaries on the relationship between kabuki and the social world was given voice in 1830 in the *Seji kenmonroku,* a caustic treatise on social mores. While it had once been the case that kabuki imitated life, the anonymous author wrote, "the theater of the present does not imitate the world; rather, it is theater itself that is the base and the world that imitates the theater."[1] To a modern viewer of kabuki from the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, it is often difficult to see how

1. Buyō Inshi, *Seji kenmonroku* (Tokyo: Seiabō, 2001), p. 260.

this "classical" form of theater once played an important role in social life, shaping taste, generating desire, broadly influencing how people perceived and lived in the world beyond the stage. But as James R. Brandon argues in his new book on *Kabuki's Forgotten War,* as late as a century after the *Seji kenmonroku* was written—and in the midst of war no less—kabuki continued to function as it had in the final decades of the *bakufu,* not merely reflecting but actually creating and shaping social experience, providing a grid through which the world was understood. Not only was "kabuki theater . . . a living, contemporary performing art as late as 1945" (p. 321) but, Brandon argues, "during the war, and especially in its early years, kabuki was partner with the government in molding Japanese support for the war. Kabuki did not have to change to do this: its nature was suited to the task" (p. 354).

"Classic kabuki," Brandon writes, would come later, in the wake of defeat and under the American occupation. Kabuki's image in the second half of the twentieth century was—and continues to be—the expression of a particular kind of "forgetting" or "erasing" through which kabuki's very contemporary nature during the first half of the twentieth century would be essentially written out of history. This forgetting has taken many forms and has operated at many levels. At the level of the individual, Brandon quotes the actor Ichikawa Ennosuke II—"The five years of the Pacific War was a dark period, a time of suffering for performers" (p. 313)—and comments: "Like most others, Ennosuke did not see himself as a participant in the war. Forgotten were his morale performances in Manchuria, flying to China to gather authentic war material, and the many heroic soldier roles he enacted in war plays" (p. 313).

Ennosuke's own "forgetting" of his wartime roles (in both senses of that word) is emblematic but is only a particular example of how kabuki's wartime history has been written (or not written) in the half century following the war, the product of what Brandon describes as a mix of "Western illusions of what kabuki was and of Japanese desires for what kabuki should be" (p. 320). For several generations of postwar historians of kabuki—in both Japan and abroad—the wartime history of the genre has been largely ignored and Brandon frames his own study as "an attempt to remember some of the more important aspects of kabuki's forgotten war from 1931 to 1945" (p. xi).

At one level—and this is particularly true of the introduction and the book's final chapter on the fate of kabuki after the war—*Kabuki's Forgotten War* is very much about questions of forgetting and remembering, about the nature of historical memory, and how forgetting and remembering have shaped the historiography of kabuki following what Brandon describes as its "fossilization" (p. ix) during the occupation. The body of Brandon's book, which follows the arc of the war, is shaped by this governing theme

of forgetting and remembering, and reads much as if it were a willful act of remembering, an attempt to restore a somehow forgotten or repressed—though barely submerged—memory. *Kabuki's Forgotten War* weaves together a rich social history of the theater with sharp analyses of the plays, their staging, and their reception. Thus, the book partakes of several narratives simultaneously: the progression of the war (which provides the basic structure of the book and the section titles—"Kabuki's Foreign Adventure: 1931–1939"; "Fruits of Victory: 1940–1942"; "Defeat and Survival: 1943–1945"; and "Kabuki Outlasts the Occupation: 1945–1947"); the ever-stricter censorship and ever-closer control exercised by the government which, in Brandon's account, brought kabuki to the brink of extinction; and the internal dynamics of the world of kabuki itself, though always placed within its social and historical context.

The chapters that trace kabuki's wartime history draw on a wealth of archival material—scripts, photographs, pamphlets, diaries, newspapers, and magazines—creating a deeply textured social history of kabuki's wartime experience. And it is the sheer volume of archival material Brandon quotes and reproduces in *Japan's Forgotten War* that is one of the book's great strengths and a facet of Brandon's study that gives to it an extremely important place in the broader documenting of Japan's wartime culture. In many ways, the book that *Kabuki's Forgotten War* most resembles is Peter High's similarly excellent *The Imperial Screen* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), which looks at Japanese film culture during the same period. Having read Brandon's book, it is difficult to imagine any new history of this period (even in survey form) that does not at least touch on kabuki's forgotten war. Indeed, the greatest achievement of Brandon's book may be to recover kabuki itself as a subject relevant to historians working in a variety of fields beyond theater history proper.

In the book's final chapter, Brandon describes the process through which "classic kabuki" was invented during the occupation as a "timeless high art in which content was immaterial" (p. 352). This narrative is one of the most absorbing in the book and is essential to understanding not just the subsequent development of kabuki in the postwar period, but the genre's historiographical treatment during the same period. And yet at the heart of kabuki as a politically disinterested, "timeless" art is an odd kernel of the role it had always played in shaping perceptions of reality.

Even as the world of classic kabuki seems remote from the concerns that animated the author of the *Seji kenmonroku* in the 1830s, the genre has become an important ambassador for traditional Japanese culture, shaping the very reality of the traditional Japan it professes neutrally to reflect on stage. For it is through the process of the genre's "fossilization" that the image of Japan that classic kabuki has projected to the world has shaped the perception—in both Japan and abroad—of the very idea of what it means to be traditional, classical, Japanese, and theatrical.